

CHOICES
Matthew 16:13-20
February 28, 1982

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

"If I'm following Christ, why am I such a good insurance risk?", a prominent clergyman asked in an essay. He was referring to a mail advertisement which comes across ministers' desks. On the outside of the envelope the urgent message announces that our particular vocation makes us the safest risk around and that inside we will discover the way to buy a lot of good insurance for a very few dollars. I'm never sure how to feel about that information. Mostly, it makes me uncomfortable.

There is such a vast difference between the situation of a modern Christian and that of most of our predecessors. The simple fact is that for many of the people of the past, being a Christian was a perilous matter. In many times it was a crime, punishable by death. In many places it brought exclusion, social alienation, persecution. With us, however, it borders on the routine, the mundane, the ordinary..... Ernest Campbell asks: "If I'm following Christ, why am I such a good insurance risk? If I'm following Jesus, why, when I have done my giving, have I so much left over for myself? If I'm following Jesus, why do my closets bulge when so many are unclothed? If I'm following Jesus, why do I have so many friends among the affluent and so few among the poor?....If I'm following Jesus, why am I getting on so well in a world that marked him out for death?" (A.D., August, 1981, p. 21)

The fact is that very few of us made a major decision to become a Christian. Most of us were born into it. All of us are part of a culture which seems to assume that Christianity is the least theological common denominator, that if you're not Jewish, Buddhist or Atheist, you are Christian. Most of us didn't decide much at all, and the decisions we made were probably applauded, not cursed. No one ever insulted us, or moved away from us or excluded us from a club or fired us from a job - or physically harmed us because we joined a church. And that fact has a way of bothering people who think about it very long.

There was a point in the life of Jesus when it became apparent that to be his friend would make one a very poor insurance risk. And at about that time Jesus himself began to press them, to make it impossible for them to remain neutral. They were travelling in the countryside, near Ceasarea. It was apparent that his mission of teaching, preaching, healing, was about to change in a radical way.

"Who are people saying I am?" he asked. Some thought Elijah, or one of the prophets, or John the Baptist. As locked in their stereotypes as we are in ours, his contemporaries didn't know who he was, and if they suspected it they quickly dismissed the notion. It's always easier to believe in a Messiah who is coming in some far-off future, than in one who is already here, which is why, by the way, some Christians have always been more concerned with the second coming than the first. "But who do you say that I am?" he asked. Peter answered for them - "The Christ - the Son of the Living God," a good solid, orthodox answer.

Jesus pressed the issue of his own identity. There is fundamental error in the way we deal with this incident. It occurs because of the way we think. When Jesus asked, - "Who do you say that I am?" - he was asking a question about them - about their willingness to follow - not about himself. The energy in this transaction is almost physical. Are you now willing for me to be Christ, your Lord? That's really the story of the New Testament: not the peculiar identity of a Galilean Rabbi, but the extraordinary obedience of the ones he called and who had the good sense and courage to follow. Open the New Testament anywhere, and you will read about people following. Modern Christianity, on the other hand seems to be more about believing.

"Who do you say that I am?" We are very much inclined to answer that intellectually. As a matter of fact, our Presbyterian tradition does put a premium on theology, the careful and reasoned intellectual approach to Christian faith. But what a mistake to conclude that all there is to Christianity is agreeing to the veracity of several ideas about Jesus of Nazareth. What a tragedy to see no further than obscure theological debates.

In one of his novels, God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, Kurt Vonnegut addresses a question to Christian intellectuals. In typically Vonnegut style the question is blunt and not very polite. "Who has time to read all the boring crap you write and listen to all the boring things you say?" (see Robert Short, Something to Believe In, p. 13)

Along the way of transforming Christianity from following Jesus to believing ideas about Jesus we have allowed it to become a boring intellectual exercise. At the same time we have managed to take out most of the demand, the discipline, the sacrifice. Ernest Campbell writes: "Do you believe in Christ? It isn't so hard to answer that....But when someone asks, 'Are you following Jesus?'....this can get to be expensive..." (op. cit., p. 20)

I am grateful for the assist we are given at this point by behavioral science. The psychologists know that there is something about humanity which ties personhood to personal will, choice, commitment. It's difficult to put in words, other than poetically, but the people who try seem to be saying that to be a person you have to want to be, will to be, try to be, chose to be. Shakespeare, that is to say, was correct: to be or not to be - that is the question. It is not a sure thing.

"You must wager. There is no choice, Pascal observed long ago. Existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre used to say that we are condemned to freedom. Hans Kung modified that a bit, with great insight, I think, by writing "We are free. But we are not free to be free....In the long run it is impossible to remain undecided in regard to reality....Not to chose is itself a choice." (Does God Exist, p. 438)

One of the people who thinks and writes most helpfully about modern life is psychiatrist-philosopher, Rollo May. In a little book on creativity he observes: "In human beings....are assertion of the self, a commitment, is essential if the self is to have any reality....A man or woman becomes fully human only by his or her choices..." (The Courage to Create, p. 5)

The crux of the matter literally, has to do with the choices we make: not simply the intellectual preferences we establish, but the commitments, the choices to be, to live, to act according to certain convictions. We become Christians, not on the basis of orthodox theology, but obedient living. "Who do you say that I am?" The answer is played out in life, or it is no answer at all.

There are libraries on the question of the nature of Christ, and each generation must think through the mystery of the incarnation in terms which are understandable and relevant to that generation. Through it all, across all the centuries, the Christian consensus has been this, at least: Jesus of Nazareth is the decisive, once-and-for-all revelation of God. But the crux of the matter is not in nodding in agreement with that assertion, but in believing it by allowing it to take shape in our life, by allowing it to influence the choices you make every day. Some of those choices are financial. Some are social. Some have to do with your world view and others have to do with your relationships with your family. Some of those choices are political, economic, public. Some of those choices have the possibility of becoming costly. Some may make us unpopular. Some may put us in conflict with company

policy, with majority opinion, with fashionable political and social ideology. So be it. He didn't promise that discipleship would be easy and we have no reason to expect that it will be so for us. In fact, we have every reason to wonder why it hasn't cost us a bit.

If Christianity isn't a matter of believing ideas about Jesus alone, it isn't a matter of slavishly imitating him either. It is the demanding business of taking what we believe about him - even if it isn't very adequate, or very much: even if it is the vaguest sort of attraction to his idealism, or goodness, or gentleness - and somehow summoning the raw courage to live like that.

What he did promise was that in following him, we would be blessed with his presence, his spirit, his grace and truth. What he did promise was that in following him we would find our peace, our salvation.

Years ago a remarkably gifted man, Albert Schweitzer wrote a major work of New Testament Scholarship "The Quest of the Historical Jesus." New Testament Scholars still use it. The last paragraph in that monumental work, however, becomes personal, pastoral. Schweitzer wrote, out of his own experience obviously,

"He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old by the lake-side, he came to those men who knew him not. He speaks to us the same word: 'Follow me!'...And to those who obey, whether they be wise or simple, he will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in his fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who he is."

AMEN.

Great God of truth and love, give us courage in this Lenten season - to believe by being: to be your people each day; to follow, gladly, faithfully, wherever your Son leads.

AMEN.